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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship of positive and negative evaluation statements to specific evaluation criteria, student characteristics, and type of writing. Subjects, 27 fifth-grade students, were asked to read samples of their own writing and writing attributed to a fictional peer. During tape-recorded interviews, the subjects were asked to rate the writing samples they read and to give reasons for their rankings. Results indicated: (1) students tended to make positive comments for stories they ranked high and negative comments for stories they ranked low; (2) there were no sex differences nor any differences based on the writing achievement of the students in their ratio of positive to negative comments; (3) students tended to use a type of criteria either positively or negatively across all their story evaluations; (4) the positive comments of low achieving students tended to be less specific about aspects of the craft of writing than were their negative comments; (5) when students verbalized an author they were more negative than when they discussed the story as an impersonal text; (6) students who were overall strongly negative or positive in their evaluations showed no other consistently distinguishing characteristics; and (7) despite pretesting, the topic appeal of the researcher-constructed stories attributed to a fictional peer varied greatly from student to student. (Three tables of data are included; 32 references and the researcher-constructed stories are attached.) (RS)

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"It's Got Humor and Stuff": Positive and Negative Stance in Elementary Students' Post-writing Evaluations

by
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The ability to stand aside from the written page and assess what has been written is a necessary skill of all writers (Welty, 1984). Even the youngest and most inexperienced writers have been observed as they "re-read" their texts, their small fingers jabbing each symbol in turn as they mouth the intended message. (Dyson, 1982; Graves, 1984) Although primary attention has been focused on assessments made during the process of writing (Beach, 1976, 1979; Flower & Hayes, 1981 Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983), increasingly, professional recommendations for writing instruction have emphasized the parallel importance of post-writing evaluative conferences to help students learn to be effective evaluators of writing (Atwell,1987; Hanson, 1987; Hillocks, 1984; Murray, 1985).

The small but growing body of research that examines the content of verbalized student evaluations of their own completed texts and those of their peers indicates that students formulate evaluative criteria at an early age, but their judgments differ in important ways from those of teachers or mature writers. Studies of children's verbalized post-writing evaluations of text (Applebee, 1978; Graves, 1984; Hilgers, 1984, 1986; Newkirk, 1982) show a general trend from global, affectively based, idiosyncratic judgments toward multi-faceted comparisons of the actual and an ideal text. At the older elementary level, of interest in this paper, student judgments may be incomplete and incoherent, focusing on one aspect of the text at a time. Students of this age are still moving toward mature evaluations that prioritize and integrate multiple criteria into a more sophisticated whole.

If teachers are to make reasoned decisons about instruction based on diagnosis of students' articulated understanding of what good writing entails, a better understanding is needed of the developmental patterns and student differences associated with students' assessment of writing (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987). To this end we have gathered, in specificed naturalistic contexts, a large body of data systematically categorized to explore the relationships between evaluative criteria, students, and text characteristics. In earlier papers, we have reported some of these relationships, notably that these young students were able to identify a wide variety of characteristics of the writer's craft, although many of their concepts were verbalized in rudimentary form (Potter, Busching, McCormick, Wilkes, &

Slesinger, 1987). There was a clear relationship between achievement and ability to access specific text characteristics (Busching, McCormick, & Potter, 1989), and to interpret correctly teacher priorities (McCormick, Potter, Busching, Wilkes, & Slesinger, 1988).

In this paper we focus on one of the most important controversies in text evaluation, the differential use of positive and negative comments. The well-documented traditional negative emphasis of teachers --from 94 % to 89.4% in six studies of text comments (Daiker, 1983,1989; Dragga, 1986; Harris, 1977; McCarthy, 1987; Stevens, 1958)--has been viewed as a major barrier to production of text (Rose, 1984) Even revision, which is frequently perceived as a search for dissonance between goals and actual, immediate text, depends on identification of positively conceptualized dimensions of writing:

> "It's important for the writer to concentrate first on what works. Too often we concentrate only on what is wrong, ignoring what is right. Yet the most successful revision comes when we identify something that works--a strong voice, a pace that moves the reader right along,a structure that clarifies a complicated subject--and build on that strength." (Murray, 1985, p. 58)

This recommendation is supported by motivational literature which indicates that children who receive excessively negative feedback may come to feel that they are unable to perform successfully, manifesting declines in achievement motivation and effortful task engaged behavior (Schunk, 1989).

Almost nothing is known about how *students* use positive and negative comments, and how they are associated with writing processes and products. In a study of college-aged students' evaluation of other students' writing, Newkirk (1982) found more positive than negative statements, a stance which was in sharp disagreement with their instructors. Our informal survey of the examples provided in two studies of older elementary students showed that in peer response groups students were almost exclusively negative in all but generalized praise (Gere & Abbott, 1985) and that, when asked to justify writing they liked or disliked, were correspondingly positive or negative (Hilgers, 1986). In this study, we examine

the relationship of positive and negative evaluative statements to specific evaluative criteria, student characteristics, and type of writing.

Method

Subjects. Twenty-seven fifth graders, 12 boys and 15 girls, were interviewed. All students were taught writing by the same teacher who emphasized student choice of topic, recursive steps in the process of writing, peer and teacher responses to drafts, and discussion of the qualities of good writing across tasks. Achievement levels ranged from the first to the tenth deciles on the CTBS test. Students scoring in the upper five deciles were designated as high achievers (n=12) and those scoring in the lower five deciles as low achievers (n=15).

Texts. Two kinds of texts were used: (1) Teachers provided samples of the children's own writing consisting of three or four texts the child had written within five weeks of the interview. (2) Four texts attributed to a fictional peer were constructed by the researchers to vary (high/low) on the dimensions of student interest in topic (determined through pilot testing) and writing craftsmanship (operationally defined by the features of information, precise language, style, clarity, and story structure). Copies of the stories are provided in Appendix A.

Interview procedures. Each student was individually interviewed by a trained interviewer who was familiar to the students, according to an informal procedure similar to their teacher conferences but with uniform presentation of questions. After reading each group of stories (Own and Constructed) aloud, students were asked to designate the best, next best, third best, and last. They were then asked to give their reasons for their rankings for only the best, next best, and last stories in turn. The order of presentation of Own vs. Constructed texts was counterbalanced.

Data Treatment. Interviews were recorded on audio tape. The transcribed student responses were segmented into idea units ("statements"), and then categorized using standard procedures for assuring

inter-rater reliability. A content-driven approach was used to develop the category system (described in Potter, et al, 198) which identifies criteria related to five major dimensions of the writing task (See Appendix B): **Topic, Text-based, Non-Text Associations, Process, and Surface Qualities**. **Topic** criteria are those that refer to the subject of the story, while **Text-based** criteria include a range of responses based on the characteristics and content of the text itself. **Non-text Associations** are those criteria that refer to students' personal experiences related to the content of the story. **Process** criteria are judgments based on events that occurred in the production and sharing of the story. **Surface Qualities** criteria are evaluative statments that refer to mechanics, spelling, or other aspects of the image of the text on paper.

Overwhelmingly, the most extensively used of the above categories was **Text-based**, which contained 11 subcategories. The most frequent (at least 5 % of the total) were:

General--states feeling tone for text without specifics

Information--elaborates on ideas, tells important facts, gives reasons

Makes Sense--is clear and relevant, is well-organized, doesn't repeat

Reality--is true, believable, or is fantasy

Features to Create Interest--is creative, has vivid language, emotions, humor, action

Identification--student identifies with character

Language--words or sentences are mentioned with no further explanation

Repeats parts--repeats portions of text without explanation

Results

What are the overall patterns of student use of negative and positive evaluative comments?

Of the entire corpus of 389 statements, 116 were negative and 247 were positive. (26 statements classified as neutral, mixed, or non-interpretable were not included in this analysis.) In general, students used negative and positive comments in a manner that was appropriate to the task at hand. A chi-square analysis indicated that student comments corresponded to their rankings (X^2 =232.44, p<.001). That

is, students tended to use positive comments to justify high rankings and negative comments for low ranking, a pattern true for both high and low achievers. This trend was especially strong for the first-ranked stories, with only four negative comments about these stories. Moreover, the percentage of positive vs. negative comments (68% vs 32%) was proportionate to the number of high (two) and low (one) rankings they were asked to justify. Rather surprisingly, the pattern of negative and positive comments about Own stories did not differ from the pattern for Constructed stories ($X^2<1$). Students were not particularly defensive of or overly critical of their own stories, with no differences in overall response patterns for high vs low achievers or males vs females.

Did students tend to use the five Criteria Areas differently for positive versus negative evaluation?

As shown in Table 1, positive and negative evaluations were not distributed equally across the Criteria Areas ($X^2=18.88$, $p<.001$). To determine which of the categories were major contributors to the significant chi-square, the standardized residuals (Haberman, 1973; Reynolds, 1984) were computed for each of the categories. The strongest differences were found in two Criteria Areas -- Surface Qualities and Non-text Association. When students commented on Surface Qualities (almost always in reference to their own stories), their comments tended to be negative, perhaps reflecting the years of predominantly negative teacher comments about punctuation, spelling, and handwriting. On the other hand, Non-text Association comments, which were almost exclusively used by low achievers evaluating their own writing (Potter et al., 1987), tended to be infrequently used for negative evaluations.

When students used Text-based criteria, were some text elements accessed more readily for either positive or negative comment?

Positive and negative evaluations (see Table 2) were not distributed equally across the text-based categories ($X^2=72.38$, $p<.001$). Computation of the standardized residuals revealed that comments categorized as Repeats Parts were more positive than expected. Comments categorized as Features to Create Interest and Identification tended to be more positive than expected as well. These student writers

apparently struggled to identify in sufficient detail what makes a piece of writing good. The categories of Repeats Parts and Features to Create Interest represent this struggle at different levels of success. As shown in Table 3, low achievers exhibited a strong tendency to repeat portions of the text they appreciated, apparently having difficulty verbalizing specific positive criteria, whereas their negative comments were almost always in the form of specific criteria rather than in the form of repeating parts of the story. High achievers, on the other hand, were better able to specify the positive aesthetic qualities of the stories, as evidenced by their relatively high proportion of positive criteria in the category of Features to Create Interest and correspondingly low levels of Repeats Parts. Interestingly, the students found it easier to comment on the positive Features to Create Interest in the constructed stories than in their own stories.

Negative comments were also distributed unevenly across categories. Computation of standardized residuals indicated that comments categorized as Makes Sense were more negative than expected (See Table 2). Comments categorized as Language and Reality also tended to be more negative than expected. The use of Makes Sense and Language categories for primarily negative comment may reflect Grice's (1975) "Cooperativeness Principle," that in conversation, the obvious should not be stated. Students may have felt that only violations of basic characteristics of written discourse were appropriate for comment. As can be seen in Table 3, Makes Sense was the most frequently used category for justifying low ranks by high and low achievers alike. In particular, low achievers dwelt on this category, using it for 40% of their negative comments.

Were students more negative or positive when demonstrating awareness of author in their evaluations?

Text-based statements were also classified according to whether students responded from the point of view of a reader without mentioning or implying an author, or whether they explicitly mentioned or strongly implied an author. This distinction was created in order to explore an important dimension of the students' growing sense of themselves as writers which manifests itself as an awareness that authors

make choices in creating text. An analysis of text-based statements according to this dimension showed that statements which mentioned an author were more negative than expected ($X^2 = 8.35$, $p<.01$), particularly in the case of low achievers commenting on constructed stories. This may reflect students' general tendency to be more critical when they see texts as human creations rather than as impersonal finished products. It may also reflect the teacherly tendency to couch praise of writing in impersonal terms ("This is a well-organized piece of writing."), and to verbalize the student as agent when offering criticism and suggestions ("You need to be more clear here."). The more critical nature of low achievers' author awareness may reflect their more frequent experience with teacher criticism.

What are the individual patterns of student use of negative and positive evaluative statements?

The qualitative analysis of individual students' patterns of response shows widely ranging differences, only partially associated with writing achievement. Most students tended to use some criteria for favorable comment and others for criticism, although the particular criteria thus distinguished varied from child to child. Only a few students used more than one criterion for both positive and negative comments. Although Table 1 appears to suggest an underlying pattern of mixing valence within each Criteria Area, this group analysis masks the strong tendency to polarize valence that is revealed by examination of individual transcripts.

In Text-based comments, for example, the apparent tendency to mix valence of comments almost disappears upon examination of individual student patterns. Although approximately half of the students had an overall balance of positive and negative in their Text-based comments, most mixed valence in only one criteria category, and only four mixed valence in two criteria categories. For example, Robbie, a low achieving student, used Repeats Parts, Information, Language, Identification, and Makes Sense positively. He used Features to Create Interest and Reality negatively, and mixed valence only for Information. Amy, a high achieving student, mixed valence for two criteria categories, Information and Features to Create Interest. She used General, Reality, Identification, and Other positively, and Makes

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Sense negatively. Only one student, a high acheiver, mixed positive and negative comments in as many as three of the seven different Text-based categories she verbalized (Makes Sense, Features to Create Interest, and Literary Features). Examples of Helen's comments, positive and negative, in each category, are:

MAKES SENSE POS: Cause it made the most sense.
MAKES SENSE NEG: ...and then it at the last part it started talking about his sister and his sister wasn't anywhere else in the thing and he said something about his sister.

FEATURES/INTEREST POS: Um, I don't know, I just thought it was funny because goldfish and three sharks is sort of different.
FEATURES/INTEREST NEG: ... it just tells about how a little girl acts when she is in second grade, and what kind of things she thinks about and what she does. (I: And yet it's not a bad piece of writing is it?) Not really, it wasn't very interesting.

LITERARY FEATURES POS: Um, I don't know, it's hard to talk about your own writing. It's just, I just thought it was good because of the ... story,
LITERARY FEATURES NEG: ...and it didn't have much of an ending.

When students used criteria in the area of Process (effort, audience reaction, steps in the process, and self as writer), their comments were also highly polarized. Almost no student used any of the Process criteria for both positive and negative comment.

The criteria area of Topic tended toward polarization, but not as strongly. Although, 12 of the 19 students who used Topic criteria made only either positive or negative comments, the others made both kinds of comments. The basis for the judgements was almost always the personal appeal of the topic, rather than other considerations such as the importance of the topic. Joan, for example, was especially articulate in stating her personal preferences for the topic of one of her own stories:

> I like unicorns and mostly if I have a chance I like to write stories about unicorns if she just tells us just to make up a story like of an animal we wanted or something like that. I write about unicorns because we have a big room full of unicorn things.

Despite our attempt to select topics of high and low interest in pilot testing, in this group of students, all of the constructed stories attracted both positive and negative feelings that were expressed in Topic justifications for rankings. Tamara says about her first, second, and fourth ranked stories: "Because I like school," "Because I don't like snakes," and "And I don't really like space." On the other hand, Kip ranked *Space* first, and commented, "Cause I like space. I aways liked space. I like space ships. That's all." About *School*, his last ranked story, he bluntly states, "I don't like school."

Another interesting finding was the discovery of a few children who exhibited a strong overall negative or a positive stance rather than the more balanced two-to-one ratio that predominated (paralleling the request for discussion of two top stories and one last story). The examination of individual transcripts of these students did not yield any clear relationships between positive or negative stance and qualitative characteristics such as the complexity of the comments or sensitivity to creativity and rhetorical convention. For example, two high achievers, one almost entirely positive in her comments (Jessie), and the other the most negative student in our sample (Ward), exhibited sensitivity to many aspects of the writer's craft in their comments, although Ward perhaps operates at a more demanding level of evaluation. Below are both students' comments on the presence of emotional expression in the story *The Terrible Snake*:

> Jessie: Well, it ends pretty good, "My grandma is the greatest." Just, it makes you think, "Wow, I wish I had a grandma like that."
>
> Ward: Well, it is not as good as that one because it doesn't have quite as much feeling in it and um ... And in certain places he or she put feeling in it where I didn't really think it really belonged.

Summary and Interpretation

1. The students tended to make positive comments for stories they ranked high and negative comments for stories they ranked low.
2. Male and female students and also high and low achievers exhibited no differences in their ratio of positive to negative comments. Students were as positive about their own stories as about the stories written by others.
3. Students tended to use a type of criteria either positively or negatively across all their story evaluations. Few students switched back and forth from positive to negative on a criterion. Some criteria tended to be used either positively or negatively across the group. Used as positive criteria for evaluation were: non-text associations, repeating parts of the story without specific criteria, identification with characters, and criteria relating to features of interest in the story such as creativity, humor, and emotional expression. Used for negative criteria were: surface features and text-based criteria such as making sense, specific language use, and relationship to reality. Other criteria were used either positively or negatively according to the individual inclination of the student.
4. The positive comments of low achieving students tended to be less specific about aspects of the craft of writing than were their negative comments (non-text association and repeating parts of the story vs. makes sense, information, relationship to reality, and features to create interest).
5. When the students verbalized an author of the story (themselves or an imagined author) they were more negative than when they discussed the story as an impersonal text.
6. Students who were overall strongly negative or positive in their evaluations showed no other consistently distinguishing characteristics such as achievement level or quality of comments.
7. Despite pretesting, the topic appeal of the researcher-constructed stories varied greatly from student to student.

In light of the instructional importance given to the identification of positive qualities of writing by Murray and others, it was promising to see that both the high and the low achieving students identified many positive qualities in their own and others' stories, perhaps a reflection of their special school writing program during the year of the interviews. Not as promising was the trend toward vagueness when citing the positive qualities of the stories, as contrasted to more specific criteria for negative

qualities. Low achievers, especially, were unable to articulate positive qualities of the writers' craft, although their tendency to repeat parts of the story they liked might indicate an unarticulated awareness of text qualities. If teachers are sensitive to the part of the text these students select for attention, they perhaps can encourage a useful level of articulation and conceptualization of the corresponding writing qualities. The most surprising finding was the striking tendency for students to use specific criteria either positively or negatively (not both), according to individual inclination. It will be especially interesting to explore the reasons for these patterns, and whether they represent inaccessible elements in the evaluative repertoire of the student (with potential to limit drafting and revising ability) or whether they represent judgments about the appropriateness of certain kinds of talk in this context (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

The study raises additional questions about instruction. At the most general level, we need to investigate the kinds of clues about progress in writing teachers can glean from students' articulated statements, and how they can be used diagnostically for decisions about instruction. How are positive and negative stances associated with successful writing strategies? Are they primarily a function of personality differences or or do they significantly influence learning? For example, is it possible that the positive, good writers like Jessie might be adept at generating quality drafts, but less able to revise than Ward with his more critical stance? We also need to understand better the strong tendency for students at this age to polarize the valence of criteria according to individual inclinations. Is it an appropriate developmental characteristic of this age, or should students be encouraged to focus on both positive and negative incidences of each dimension of writing? An exploration of these questions relating students' articulated criteria with their writing strategies and products will assist teachers in helping students in the middle years develop constructs of writing that will serve them well in their future personal and professional lives.

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Table 1

Proportion of Positive and Negative
Statements For Each Criteria Area

	Negative	Positive	Number of children using criteria	Number of statements
Topic	.33	.67	18	30
Text-based	.30	.70	27	260
Non-text Association	.14	.86	13	28
Process	.41	.59	15	27
Surface Qualities	.72	.28	10	18

Table 2

Proportion of Positive and Negative Statements
for Each of the Most Frequently Used Text-based Criteria

All Children

	Negative	Positive	Number of children using criteria	Number of statements
General	.32	.68	14	25
Information	.37	.63	14	27
Makes Sense	.86	.14	15	29
Reality	.47	.53	12	15
Features to Create Interest	.20	.80	19	60
Identification	.08	.92	16	24
Language	.50	.50	11	16
Repeats Parts	.04	.96	14	48

Table 3

Proportion of Positive and Negative Text-based Statements in Each Criteria by Achievement Level

	Low Achievers		High Achievers	
	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
General	.06	.13	.15	.07
Information	.14	.13	.13	.07
Makes Sense	.40	.01	.28	.04
Reality	.14	.05	.05	.04
Features to Create Interest	.14	.11	.18	.50
Identification	.03	.15	.03	.10
Language	.06	.02	.15	.08
Repeats Parts	.03	.40	.03	.10
	100%	100%	100%	100%

APPENDIX A: CONSTRUCTED STORIES

A TERRIBLE SNAKE

When I was five years old, my grandma chopped off the head of a snake with a hoe. She saved my life! I was walking up to the back porch when I saw the terrible snake right in front of me. It hissed. "Help! Help!" I called. Grandma came running. When she saw the big snake, she took the hoe and chopped its head right off. I was shaking and crying because I was so scared. Grandma hugged me, and we watched the snake's long brown body wiggle on the ground. My grandma is the greatest.

WAITING WHILE MY MOTHER SHOPS

When my mother takes me to the furniture store with her, I pretend that I can buy anything in the store. I look for furniture for my room. Last time I found a blue velvet chair with big fluffy pillows. "This is like sitting on a cloud," I said, as I sank into the soft chair. Then I saw a crazy lamp. The light bulb was a coconut. Two monkeys climbed up to get it. "What a crazy lamp!" Just then I heard my mom calling, "Get over here. We're going to look at tables now." I didn't want to do it, but sometimes you have to do what your mother says.

SCHOOL

You need books, pencils, and other supplies and other things. I am not late to school because I always get ready on time. I am always on time for school. School is nice for learning all the things. It has six grades, and then you go to another school. Children learn about what you need in life, like things you need to know in reading and in math. I am good in math, and I get good grades. I had a good paper today. My sister has good papers, too.

SPACE ADVENTURE

I'm going into space. Whoom! I can go far. I went out in space on the space ship. There are lots of places to go in space, and we went very far past many stars. He was a big creature, and he was in space, too. The space ship was great. I know how to go into space. You go in the ship out in space. I saw stars and galaxies as we flew. The stars were very nice to see and interesting. I liked the stars. I saw stars on T.V. They were nice.

APPENDIX B: CATEGORIES OF STUDENT EVALUATIVE RESPONSES

TOPIC
- GENERAL
- IMPORTANCE
- INTEREST LEVEL
- OTHER

TEXT-BASED
- GENERAL
- REPEATS PARTS
- AGE APPROPRIATENESS
- MORAL LESSON
- INFORMATION
  - General
  - Elaboration
  - Reasons
  - Other
- MAKES SENSE
  - General
  - Clarity
  - Repetitiveness
  - Relevance
  - Organization
  - Other
- FEATURES TO CREATE INTEREST
  - General
  - Creativity
  - Emotions
  - Humor
  - Action
  - Characterization
  - Style
  - Other
- REALITY
  - General
  - Credibility
  - Real Life
  - Other
- IDENTIFICATION
- LITERARY FEATURES
  - Plot
  - Characters
  - Forms/Genres
  - Matches Requirement
  - Other
- LANGUAGE
  - Word Choice
  - Sentences and Paragraphs
  - Other
- OTHER

NON-TEXT ASSOCIATION
- GENERAL
- PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
- NON PERSONAL EVENTS
- OTHER

PROCESS
- GENERAL
- EFFORT
- AUDIENCE REACTION
- STEPS IN PROCESS
- SELF AS WRITER
- OTHER

SURFACE QUALITIES
- GENERAL
- NEATNESS
- SPACING
- HANDWRITING
- MECHANICS
- USAGE
- LENGTH
- ART WORK
- OTHER

NOT INTERPRETABLE